

Corresponding Voices

Volume 9

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Yusef Komunyakaa

Jane Springer

Caitlin Vance

Santee Frazier

Edited by

Pedro Cuperman &

Jules Gibbs

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Contents

Preface 9

Yusef Komunyakaa

from THE LAST BOHEMIAN OF AVENUE A 13

Jane Springer

WHERE 27

PSALM 28

NORTH COUNTRY FIG STORY 29

WAH WAH PETAL 34

PSALM 2 36

ROCK 37

PSALM 3 39

WHICH OF THESE UTICAS DOES NOT BELONG 40

THEN THE GHOST 42

Caitlin Vance

ON THE NEWS 47

*TO MY NIECE BORN (ON CHRISTMAS) TO AN
ACCIDENTAL MOTHER* 48

<i>MY RELATIONSHIP WITH BEAUTY WILL ALWAYS BE CONFLICTED</i>	50
<i>EVERYONE THINKS YOU'RE SWEET</i>	53
<i>SMILE</i>	55
<i>BLOOD COMES LIKE RAIN AFTER A DROUGHT: POEM IN RESPONSE TO YOUR SHITTY POEM</i>	56

Santee Frazier

<i>VENTILATOR</i>	61
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Preface

Corresponding Voices once again brings together a select group of diverse poets, offering an encounter, one we hope engenders an appreciation for both the idiosyncrasies of the individual voices, as well as the syntheses between them — intersections that are at once convergent and divergent in musicality, theme, vision, and voice.

In putting this issue together, what struck me as a vital kinship between the voices collected here, was the way these poets charge the quotidian world with the power of estrangement in order to “dwell in Possibility — A fairer House than Prose,” as Emily Dickinson put it in poem 657. In other words, the poetic mind is aware of its own constructions, and constructs spaces that are “numerous of Windows — Superior — for Doors.” It’s a venture that is at once empowering and disempowering, a testament to the lure of language that can, by the same token, create apertures of meaning that saturate and satiate us with stability, even as it continually arches out of itself, and threatens (or promises) to scatter into disillusionment.

Yusef Komunyakaa opens this issue of *Corresponding Voices* with a section from a longer work-in-progress, “The Last Bohemian of Avenue A.” Here, the speaker talks to his dog, Roscoe, about “a tune I was born to carry beyond earthy dominion,” a tune whose notes bent life into the perpetual question — a grasping, a condemnation, where the cure was part Coltrane, part Miles, part love. There is dog sense and man sense, and a communion between the two that makes more of each, that spins the extrasensory language of memory and longing, the language we use like a canine instinct, to sniff out the evidence of our own lives, “to witness the unheard-of.”

“What fantasy do you dwell in” ask the poems of Jane Springer. To answer,

Springer seems to say, is like trying to grasp at the snarl and unruliness of our lives. And the entropy is everywhere: in the memory and mishap of the quotidian, in the machines and propaganda that infiltrate domestic spaces, in a house that arches towards both Pluto and Lethe, where the dogpack tears up the linoleum floor and the “bloodhounds bellydance.” Springer sings the ballad of “the rural art of decay,” of the ever-fluxing dwelling place of the soul.

In Caitlin Vance’s hands, a smile becomes the conciliatory gesture that inflicts harm, and we get the uneasy feeling that we’re unprepared for a new sort of violence wrought by a misogynistic society, “The terror that awaits if you follow it/ someone else telling us what to do.” There’s a deceptive declarative quality to these poems, a rawness that lends the illusion of being resigned to endure a violence made common, blunt, raw, frank. But the poems assert themselves, shove back, make traceable the false and sinister gestures of hatred and self-hatred.

Slow embers burn in the lines of Santee Frazier’s “Ventilator” series, which is part of a longer work-in-progress; a chiaroscuro where one image seems to black out as another presses through, like a “wood stove in the dark/ its bulbous hull a womb/ of popping embers.” In the pivot and press of thingyness, between the static of TV and “kin clacking billiards/gulping down pickled eggs and beer,” this world is rendered in quick cuts, in flashes that sear and leave us “lonesome as setting a fire with a match & antifreeze.”

To build each stanza, each little room, in a way that dares to tell us something about the way we make meaning — in “Chambers as the Cedars — Impregnable of Eye,” as Dickinson put it — is to do the work of the soul; and to sing of the soul demands the most daring acts of improvisation and imagination. I hope you will find that the poems in this issue of *Corresponding Voices* act as small but powerful apertures that alter perception, disrupt the static materialities of our world — and release new meaning.

Jules Gibbs

Yusef Komunyakaa

from THE LAST BOHEMIAN OF AVENUE A

I'm a sucker for begonias.
Yeah, winter was hell
but now springtime
tangos me into the night,
& wine-drinking weather
is here, not any old rotgut
with an indelible drawl.
If this isn't a foolproof
paradise, then I am
in a speakeasy of white
noise, & not one star
seen in this rigmarole
of neon & disquiet.
Roscoe, why are you
gazing at me with a hard
question in your eyes?
We used to be serene
as two lotus-eaters
could be, not so
counterrevolutionary
in this secular season.

I woke at daybreak,
saying, Barabbas Jones,
you're born to witness
the unheard-of, in a place
& time where one stands
framed in a picture within
a picture, gazing out
at the stray poppies
of bedlam.

Are you trying to read
my mind again, huh?
You look like Socrates
begging for the hemlock,
but you should be happy
we have a rent-control
roof over our heads.
The landlord would be
elated to kick us out
on the damn streets
to eat caviar outta
garbage cans, señor.

You see, in this age
one man's downfall
can be another man's
foxtrot. Why the heck
are you looking at me
like that, Roscoe?
I know I gave you
your prime cut
& two green pills
at sunrise. I know
we must go to the vet
& see why your eyes
are changing color.
I wish you could tell me
if you only see gray
paradoxes like a tomcat.
Oh man, I have a surprise
for you, & it doesn't
have anything to do
with a sunny bordello
of whimsical need, gala,
or tropical servitude.

You have to know
in your animal way
why I'm jumping up
& down inside myself.
There was a time if I
wished for something
out of this world
it would accost me
on the next block —
outrageous & pearly.
But we can't forget
the landlord's decree
of hounds smelling
blood. Maybe I'm a fool,
& I should've moved
to B or D years ago.
Now Charlie's house
on the corner is selling
for a dancer's arm & leg.

Look at you —
once you were marked,
numbered, & tagged
at the pound, but since
we been hanging out
these years, you're almost
a half-wild mutt overtaken
by the Lord's solicitude.
I used to be a boomerang
out there, lost in a world
of plenty. Yes. No. Damn!
What's this pain in my side,
Roscoe? All these zings
& zaps use me as a rod
to ground radio waves
on a polar red icecap.

I can feel it in my body.
Now, Sheila used to say,
Rabbas, one blue moon
you'll wish you never ran
up & down these streets
paved in tar & brimstone.
Look, please stop dancing
& just be a damn dog.
Forget Sheila. She's fat
& happy out in Orange,
New Jersey, preening
under a big sweet gum
& sighing over Clark Kent
as a quick-change artist
in a telephone booth.
I bet she hasn't touched
the cello since we kissed
& waved a last good-bye.
With your little howl
we were a mind-bending trio.
Which human voice you wish?
Do you want to hear the tenor,
baritone, the alto, or soprano
this morning? Look at you
looking at me as a lost soul.
When we first rescued you
from the pound in Queens
they were calling you Mister,
but Sheila thought
you were a Roscoe,
& it fits like a bat's wing
on a dark basement wall.
You're suppose to see
everything near & far,
low & high. I know
the changing of colors
can make one think

he's one of King Philip's soldiers
returning from battle
with his eyes plucked out.

Look, even if you're a dog
don't you know history?
No, I'm not going off
my rocker. I was reading
Joseph Roth last night,
& his voice is in my head —
he's a funny cat
living out of two suitcases.
I couldn't stop laughing.
A dog seated on a man's
back, what kinda stunt
is that, huh? Now, don't
look all egoistical, every
reference point isn't you.
The Victrola is history,
& I believe you know
I have seen capital life
with its barbed tail
jabbed into its mouth.

Look, Sheila & me — we
went to shrinks galore
& even a guru or two
at the Spiritual House,
but we found nothing
worked as well as one
or two hours of “A Love
Supreme” & “All Blues.”
Someone hoodwinked her
with the idea we were living
in sin at the end of the world.

I said, Honey, if I die before you
I'll station a ghost at your door,
& you can forget all
the belly-laughing tapes
& the temple of gongs.
Sometimes I'd see her
whispering to Chantilly
who began to see herself
as some back-door idol
but I don't go for that jive.
I know, they used to call me
a fool, but my credentials
are impeccable when it
comes to romance.

Did you notice they took
down the bronze plaque
from Yardbird's house?
But no one can make me
forget the sound of his alto,
how he rode a spotted horse
with a full moon sweating
a glow of brass. The man
lived. I wonder if I dare
to steal some feeling
out of naked September
when I pass that house.
I could hear him cursing
& pleading to impresarios
who thought they owned
the century's subterranean
masters of cakewalk.

I was thinking nature
pulls us toward the vortex,

& then looked up to see
Sheila at the corner,
lugging along a cello.
She turned & said, If you
are following me, at least
you could be a gentleman
& help carry this cross.
The next day she brought
over this begonia in a taxicab,
& we sat here sipping cognac
& talking The Second Sex,
Being & Nothingness,
& Judas Priest, & before
I could guess whackamo
I was a shy baby seal lost
in a fish market on Friday
at daybreak, & Debussy
was in my bloodstream.
I was held in the bridled
sway of a woman's hips.
I understood I couldn't
take the damn iron bit
out of my mouth if I tried,
but I'd never be blind fish
for anyone's last supper.

Don't look at me like that,
Roscoe. You make me think
of what I've seen, a refrain
of light & dark, the Hudson
running through birch
& sweet gum, the years
of ups & downs in my head.
Sometimes I wet a reed
on my tongue, close my eyes
& rock back on my heels,

& I play the way it was
before this was a boon
of souls among old world
fortunetellers, rag pickers,
feather merchants, & two-bit
speculators lost in the scent
of wild spices. I let myself go
with the quartet, & here I am.

When I got sick last year
I swear I saw a smile
in the landlord's eyes,
but I outfoxed the joker.
I had squirreled away
enough nuts for winter.
This was his last chance
to lob cream off the top,
& I thought the bastard
was going to tiptoe down
from Lucifer's penthouse
& knife me in my sleep,
but it would be a helluv
death-hold at the brink,
& that is what pulled me
up on my feet to fend off
tigers & lions in the fog.
I'm not going to name him
because you would accuse me,
but no one can tell you I don't
adore calligraphy & jade vases
from the Ming Dynasty.

A look at the homeless
on these half-broken streets
makes me see Jesus

as a born-again socialist
thrashing moneychangers
& harlots from the temple.
These days, I lose myself
in lush public gardens
refusing to pretty-up
the agony of things.
Sometimes, old boy,
we just don't know
if the cut of a jacket
is right.

Look, why are you cocking
your head that way, huh?
You want to get out & chase
your dream-rabbit around
the park double time?
Are you ever going to use
your amazing six sense
against crooked laws
of time & false luster,
goat pellets for food?
You look like you need
another piece of juicy,
fresh, bloody meat,
the best money can buy.

Some of us weather storms
hard to believe, but I know
when the sickness came here
to Alphabet City, my friend
Joe Top used to say, Rabbas,
He's sorting out buckwheat
from the chaff, & I'd say,
Man, we're in this together,

& if we ain't, we're already
at the end of our towline.
When he fell into night fever
I didn't miss a day visiting him
up there on the third floor.

When I first met Sheila
she rode a blue bicycle
& posed over at The Studio,
but one night, I said, Look,
I don't have a jealous bone
in my body, & she grinned
& said, I'm a good woman,
Rabbas. That summer sprung
a tune I was born to carry
beyond earthly dominion,
into cold burning toward
forgiveness, & I followed.
I don't know about you
but in show business,
you really have to grip
your moral compass. Look,
I saw you eyeing the poodle.
I could feel you tugging
& whining on your rope
leash, but you must forget
your three-fifths of a man
psychosis, because you won't
believe things seen & heard
when lights are turned out.

Have I ever served you
any processed meat
or goulash out of a tin can?
Maybe a silver-blue quail

every other now & then
spooked from a flaming bush.
You eat good as a prince.
Well, at least you're not
the infamous scapegoat
everyone calls Brother.

Roscoe, would you please
stop your jigging around
this floor, as if you're all
tied up in monkey meat.
I remember when you
would still be out there
in the dead cold, your tail
uncurled like a grace note,
dreaming of a soup bone,
happy as a wolf in a snow-
storm. But now what's left
is only style. It's not a way
of being, & my few friends
still alive — we're knocking
on wood — are damn good
metaphysical detectives.

Jane Springer

WHERE

I'm searching for the warehouse of beaches where Archimedes counts sand
I've got a problem with the counting, not the math — but the money
in the moneychanger's hand & the smokestack, not the oxygen, the fire
in the nostril of an ass — but the jukebox in the warehouse where
the counting goes down's turned under the siren's wave-
leveled shotguns, wake of new construction, clamshack
where you couldn't find an accidental pearl if you led all the buffalo
from auction to the ocean — & wouldn't that add up to another wrong
junction? It used to be

on Gains St. where the wild orange ranged — I'm looking for the stingray
in a gravel parking lot, sea oats sweeping busted windows, not the
glass — but some translucence, & I get so tired of propaganda: Eat More
Seaweed! It's misleading — a teensy-weensy sphere eluding grasp, stuck
to wings of no-see-ums', swatting, losing, not the Fuji or the
figgy pudding but the sunburn peeling back to original skin —
it's taken seven days to get the salt map with its axis of symmetry
aligned, I've a problem with the logic — not the beaches, but the cosmic
sale that came, beforehand.

PSALM

Blessed is the one who don't
do-si-do with the man
or vogue in the way that gunmen take
or sit in the company of harangues,
but whose delight is in creek that has no face,
& who meditates on its current day and night.
That metaphysical giant is like a stranger's song,
that sidles the lawn
& whose barn does not weather —
whatever they love becomes better than law.

Not so the others!
They are like spammed ads
jellied in the can.
Therefore they can't stand in the awareness,
or speculate in the choir of plain nature —
for the Groove watches over the way of the devoted,
but the way of the others leads yonder.

NORTH COUNTRY FIG STORY

House of celebration, here happens the grand opening of my brain — let the salmon's 'I' swim silent & learn Don Juan's hard 'J.' Guests bring dear wines with divots deep enough to fit Vienna sausage cans. A Tidy Bowl ad — they swish in spit-cups — I'm like, Damn! You can't save that shit for later, now.

'What a comfy house, Lived-in' the guests file in. An affront, our fridge, where a novel scrap begins 'Pepper,' & ends 'Transcendent Fuck.' Is this proper literature, w/an 8-year kid? Enter fine cheese, ash layers it same as bloodlines run through quartz. This should probably not remind me of Holocaust lamps —

that's my mama talking, we called mom The Dark Knight.
You could open conversation with D.K.
by winning a Nobel —
but no way to steer it from Aunt Nila's macerated hip.

In our house, it's fatal to hit 'play' on any machine. Enter the guest's figs. Squashy with tough dishwasher-colored skin, my mate & kid know better than to touch — but One hits 'play' on CD, Lucy Bogan brags a bluesy 'I got nipples on my titties,' the second his 'play' on *Assassin's Creed* — innards split a screen, is this appropriate? The natives' customs are un-known — seems Ovid's not drawled long of 'O.'

Here they cut fried chicken with knives. Here they heat Saran to windows with hair dryers & call it *insulation*, they don't wear house shoes to the grocery but parade town zipped in sleeping bags called *coats* — no one flashes gold

teeth. Often snow, as in Kandahar it snows — though
I once thought all the Middle East

a sand globe.

The ‘livedin look’s’ due to our wild dogpack tearing 3 linoleum
layers to concrete. The largest mass exposes big fake
bricks. ‘The rural art of decay,’ guests joke, trying to qualify
this home where horse devours steam on the kitchen’s washer,
what’s hid under a lace tablecloth I dried on high
instead of taking time to iron —

back home the mamas shoot you for less.

My daddy makes kickass pimento cheese, what came from
government, back when, now even Junot Diaz pokes
fun of Velveta. I want to be polite & don’t think the crowd
can hear her when I says: Weird. How you supposed
to eat it? The fig. Genus Ficus, from the family
Moraceae.

We had a Ficus when we came here, kept it in basement,
did just fine — brought it up for spring, lost its leaves —
dead naked in the driveway BANG just like that, as if
the daylight shocked it.

Then comes this long wave of awe:

‘She never had one?’

‘She never did!’

‘Really?’

‘Never had a fig,’

as if I’d never read *Figagain’s Wake*.

I read Harlequins in highschool, I read The Dark Knight’s
copy of *Richard Nixon’s Breach of Faith*. That’s where I
learned George Bush the senior used to side with women’s
rights but flip-thonged when he came into orifice. When you

come into office it's suspected you change. 'It will
change your life!' our guests say

about the fig, they reminisce over their first ones, not yet ripe
& sour appleish or tender fleshed, sweet — *naïveté*, at home
that's same as earnest or plumstupid.

Fuck! We forgot a mousetrap
by the toaster, mouse stirs, peanutbutter whiskered.

Our son's dropped his sirs & ma'ams to purchase apps of tanks,
my husband's slapped a tip jar down, he handles snakes,
the bloodhounds bellydance. But this party's circled in on
me, counting on impending fig-nirvana while I stink
eye the thingy. 'Not yet!' one shouts, 'you have
to halve it.'

Like yang & yin, the halved
babe of King Solomon's
decision, Berlin before
the wall came down —
Mason & Dickson, or the last
elephant separated from
its tusk. One might
imagine Eve's fig
leaf served a county line
between her pubic &
the public.

'Get her a napkin, she may find the fruit too rich.'

The Dark Knight disliked being talked about in 3rd person while
present, while halved in her wheelchair. Up here they
call that agency, they say 'She wanted agency,' that she
deserved it. An agent got our pal a mess of cabbage for selling
filmrights to his murderous Virginia gin-running
family's gossip. No one owns him, now.

If you talk agency where we're from, you mean realestate, your house is paid for. You pay for it by plying your friends with bourbon, not wine they hesitate to drink all the way down. Soon cash flows from every edifice — that's why we say 'he shit a ton of brinks' — the bricks is bought, not stolen. Stealing is what tourists

do, unwittingly. They chip lava rocks from a volcano's precipice they're so unfamiliar with they don't realize it's Vesuvius rolling underfoot, that's how they get conned into snipe hunts. The natives always tell you, you catch these gourmet birds by dragging a bag, blindfolded, while they scream & beat the bushes 1 mile down a bayou.

The blindfold's so you hear the fowl, better to catch it.

Listen. The truck guns farther than a mile away, 20 or 3000, far as Pluto or my father's voice, & now my watch drops to the swamp, like those New Years' crows falling from Arkansas sky after fireworks. What they don't tell you is the bag must be burlap, you have to go at midnight, you will do some time in exile.

Someone hands me a halved fig, the guests watch me, close as a Polanski flick, my mouth hangs, an open sack. Outside strange rustlings — a possum party calling dressed in tuxedos of dead leaves, maybe. The figs: shipped in from a neutral country. I loves these comrades.

They're intelligent, humane, even. They've brought our family gifts the way one honored Agamemnon, or how my first professors brought me 'real books,' not with condescension's air, but glad hearts, blooming irises. For all I knows, the figs waft myrrh & frankincense. But I'm ashamed to own a house at all, shame — a sacred place.

The dogs chewed off the cabinet door corners, our sills hold

job site bottles no one else would keep. Floors slope
so bad you'd think you row a johnboat to Lethe. The crowd's
impatient for the story's end, but this is not the branch's
story — why should the branch always get to hold the grapes
just out of the fox's reach?

If the great Bedouin, Antar, offered a fig to the fox, who'd never
had one, he might say:

'her mouth is as an ungrazed meadow,
whose herbage the rain has guaranteed,
in which there is but little dung;
and which is not marked with the feet of animals.'

But every fox holds the mother in her knows the sublime is
two parts revelation & one secret

kept.

WAH WAH PETAL

When a blues band shops for real music it may cost a walk, an hour or year,
a man left by a woman, a chest of guns—

two suns.

*

So this longneck gets her own war. She can't believe the fireworks parading
through her chest.

Her table so changed:
The Army-issue breakfast—she pees real bullets.

She's happy, but there are times her apartment window combusts.

*

Last night two sons of guns shoot bullets at an army of doves. But it's dark,
they miss—& a blues man becomes

a changed woman.

*

So this man, a real firecracker, parades through the door holding an Iraqi boy
across his chest. Tells me he can't believe war

is good & puts the little boy to sleep with a shot of music. Who am I to tell
him what to do?

We make love with his gun, then breakfast.

*

No combusted doves, here, or bullet breakfast—changed times left the Army in a rock bar, happy.

The doves? Sometimes Eve lets them sleep beside her cheek.

*

So this woman in a Little Rock bar walks up & tells me about her son she loves who returned Iraq two years ago today.

Two longnecks cost a dollar, it's Happy Hour.

She lets him sleep with his Army issue gun across his chest—who is she to tell him what to do—he left a boy, now a man, the gun aids sleep.

Sometimes when making breakfast—she can't believe it's him at her table so changed. He's ok but there are times.

Last New Years Eve they made it through the afternoon parade, were window shopping when firecrackers combusted & he dove

under a truck, would not come out. The time she got up in the dark to pee he shot a bullet through the door beside her cheek.

How can she tell him—time he get his own apartment?

They play good music in this bar, a real blues band.

PSALM 2

There will be very little nudity except for the soft underbelly
of ibis, jalapenos in the greens —
you thought all the angels ate sorghum & drank Courvoisier?

& there will be primal tears in the shag carpet, tea-olive
oscillating from the fan even now you are nodding,

having accepted you'll never be home again.

ROCK

The coral in the mortar

seems not to do with a second kiss behind the fortuneteller's
booth, Spike Easterling's

Bubblicious mouth parted, tectonic plates to admit

hostages

we did not understand, that year

Ali's proposal to my sis, eating kookoo sabzi & osh on pillows,
in our socks

could be dangerous,

braces caught — I thought Spike quartz to my feldspar, that
Ayatollah's surname was Khomeini,

we thought plain water too severe for dinner —

at the fair, Spike's hand all day in my back pocket, lamb we
pet then had to put back,

to get my sister's passport — I liked the new ziggurat scarf
fluttered waves in

her hair,

Jimmy Carter's name conjured peanuts & the hall of mirrors
where his brother stayed drunk

enough to brand his own beer, there's a carnival incense floats
over bleating

commercials for uranium, *esfand* — reminds me of diabase, dactite
the rhyolite of Iran, less than

all the bowing we did

at Ali's apartment, prayer mats rolled up like magic carpets &
ticket to the double

Ferris wheel of my sister's almost-marriage, chador folded
in her suitcase if a

suitcase served as temple

hard rock playing by the scrambler, cigarette butts smashed
by cotton candy in the mudwash

by the fair gate, rock of ages
rock of oil lamps, olives,

if only I hadn't kissed Spike's brother, first, that morning's
rollercoaster wrecked between

two possible countries — vision of a market lamb's

full head on ice, in the kitchen
Amy's crying, failed

Operation Eagle Claw, then Ali's weird
disappearance, what love

elects may appear glassy to aphanitic to porphyritic
deception,

Rock,

Who first settled you
in Cain's hand?

PSALM 3

Questions sparked gold in the gingko's litter, the pipeline bolt
held in its mold & wild horses grazed Bahia,
the steppes of central Asia —

The graves of our mothers sprang mouths & still lay lakes
you could drink from, straight. Did you know whole
species of lightning bugs fly at differing

heights?

Scant elders tended gardens outside the hard drive's census,
down 9 mile swamp, otter play — & we could believe
that ivory billed woodpecker still sang beside

the landfill of defunct cells —

Little life, I never learned how not to be earnest enough for
strangers — each time the plane touched down I kissed
the continuous dirt turning worms

under me, to you.

WHICH OF THESE UTICAS DOES NOT BELONG

What if it was not the salt of this body I want dissolved, but the other
body I'd become?

You will know them by their brine —

The first year's barrage of defunct chimneys, factory windows
blacked out to churches-

purple cloth, olive oil, wine,

late-converted into dental offices, weedy alleys, sleet, the ruin-porn
of garbage-

piers — & what sophisticated moorings.

cats — it seemed all the Victorians in Utica burned between blizzards

In a cork tree forest, their sick figures,

& we froze with 'new' scenarios, the bejeweled anchorwoman's rented
dress — cut to

children buried in clay pots,

the reporter, stoic-chic, by the overturned toboggan — slow fade,
computer graphic:

their bellows reveal intake valves,

Insurance Fraud? lettered gold across ash steps —

an ocean fixed in mosaic —

How not to feel stylistically removed
from a wealth
of kitsch-
sentiment?

papyrus's fragility cancels accurate accounts.

The Roman arches of Trajan must have served passage, too, for some pedestrian's longing

*We don't need no water
let the motherfucker burn!*

to bring down the gilt statues stuck above their entrance, Utica —
how lonely, now, your giant

By their no-face doll, you'll know them —

turtle fountain looks by the city's vacant floorplan & adjacent sand-
scape. & our heat kept

their water filled drums made a deeper sound.

cutting out, & our car kept rolling smoke over who knows what
tribes buried by the Mohawk

By their meat preserved in brine,

river's bank. Ancient City. People of the Standing Stone. What
Phoenician could get

reservation cigarettes, casinos.

past your Majardah's mouth, filled with the agrarian silt runoff —
or the cheap-o-commercials

Only if you speak with elders —

sung by men in leisure suits, so our kid kept reciting: 'Call your
Peoples' Lawyer,

you will know them by shekó:lih,

when you need a lifeline?' & we went weeks seeing no one but
these skeletal structures —

elm bark lodge, survival beadwork —

that's how identical the gods' fingerprints became — by Utica's
everlasting late trains,

Did you hear wind sing your name?

THEN THE GHOST

Sent a great wind through the corn, and such a violent storm arose that the tractors threatened to overheat.

All the drivers were afraid and each cried out to his own granary. And they threw personal radios to the field path to lighten the load.

But the martyr stayed in the root cellar, where she lay down Dreamlandia.

Not even coyotes could wake her, ‘How can you sleep? Get up and call on your DJ to restore productivity.’

Then the drivers said to each other, ‘Come, let us paper scissors rock to determine who is responsible for this cataclysm.’

& it was all scissors to the martyr’s paper. So they asked her, ‘Tell us, who’s to blame for heisting our livelihood? What kind of work do you do?’

What fantasy do you dwell in? Who are your people? What’s the zip?’

She said, ‘I am worshipper of the last native tree whose roots poison the soil & whose fruits fall on the witless squirrel yet

when the green husks ferment several months, issues forth an indelible ink — even if my peeps once were blue skinks, & from the map of my marker

comes barks so various they never repeat.’

Santee Frazier

VENTILATOR

in your grip
 a lighter
thumb & flint
sparking to flame
blankets ablaze
 muted fire of fabric

they leap a puddle
 dome bellied
 sticky with pop
plum dark feet & ankles

Cranium crammed
 through the windshield.
T-bird bottomed-out
 in a ditch —
dash still lit,
 school of cans
 scattered across the seat

television static
silhouette

his head a bobbing
like an oil derrick
hair a wiry frizz
projected on the sheetrock

—

You see morning sun yellow in splintered wood paneling,
brass hands of clock blistering rust.

Pinto beans,
cornbread, salt meat melted into the juice —
yellowing the mash. mustard
Can shaped meat,
fried in bacon grease. sliced,

—

you stuff balled up socks between
floor and door
so drunk jams his foot

—

Through almond shaped mask holes,
shirt off, jeans unbuttoned, work boot for pillow. pulsating lips wet with snoring,
Gashed knuckles, burn scar shaped like a three pronged fork

on the round of his shoulder, cheeks cratered, nose shiny, fungal.
School of cans, ashtray spired orange — it is halloween,
the trailer house lit dim blue, outside

leaves scatter

applause.

—

On your knees, swiveling on a stool, scan your face in the neck of a whiskey
bottle, glowing in
grime.

It is Easter, your kin clacking billiards
gulping down pickled eggs & beer.

You stand at a pinball machine mashing the flippers —
the deep ding of steel

the ball slicking its way across the plastic
carnival in a box

like the sound of bees popping in a paper bag.

Projected on the back-glass, your face and Dolly's lit up
like gospel, hoot and stomp, echo in the tavern. The juke
bright against the cinderblock, "THE FORGET IT"

— blinking pink neon.

—

Through almond shaped mask holes you see a dim lit bathroom,
small hexagon tiles,

black and white, patterned to shape
a walkway,

the stalls boxed and beamed wood.

On your tippy toes, neck out stretched,
you see, a projected on the mirror,
scribbled on a paper plate,
crosshatch of screech owl's face,
tied to your head with fishing twine.
With your finger find where crayon meets paper,
eye holes cut jagged with an razor blade.

Iron glowing in the dim – the trailer house skewered by smoke pipe —
walls smeared by greased up hands
sink overflowing with crusty pans.

Your ear to the floor, you hear cars shadowing a scene on curtains —
chrome & glass shaking the trailer tin.

Ear to the floor one eye in the crack of the door you see a curling iron,
empty pack of Kool,
bits of crumb & toenail
pools of wax, red as lovemaking — the smell of mucus & salt.

Nomads in the city peddling jailhouse scrawls of silver and gold
wigwams.

can in the fist

showers the Midas
he watches the blistered
brass
 clock hands strike
hours by slipping
a stripped gear
 dull tick of veneer
lonesome as setting a fire
with match & antifreeze

when the brick glows blue
bright
 the night
slashing concrete
swallowing up store innards

RED OAK

RED OAK

RED OAK

blinking atop
shingles
 squalid
against a plywood roof
spire dim & muggy

snap of wing
 snap of exoskeleton
on glass
 the town sleeps
to the falling creek

when the dawn comes down
what rotgut will be chugged
where vomiting is concerned
in the echo of latrine

scrawls of yardbirds his ledger
carwashes

distant worlds
blue as mist
blue as tv
shadow boxes
shadow of mist
deadeye glowing
white in the socket
grunting his face
in the puddle
can clutched
praying
in the puddle humming
his innards loose
in the stockyard
were grass gnarls
a carburetor
half
wrenched
from an eggshell junker
the factory
jutting
jogging
corn niblets down
a snaking ring
gears
no face in the dime shine
of can
no face in the puddle
under the florescent awning
of SUPER S
fried burritos glowing
orange grease on a storefront
window
gnashing his elbows into
atop his hips
too blanked

to arrest
 kidneys boiling
in Night Train
the path of pebbles
that makes road
 the rain
crunching the can
 rain
thumping his jacket
 rain
eating the dust
 rain & road

hawking at the bits in his pockets
tooth scraping grime from his nails

find his head jammed into the crevice
of a dually

 a brain smashed
 gold
sack to his grill
 ventilator uncrunched
lips to spectacle
knuckles
 canaled by Midas

—

yonder the far flung pint
huddled in flies
amalgam of lip spit
 corn shine

long gone
 the dim glow

slit eyes
 clamant mask
carved by sun
 & pucker
moss hair
 hyde veined finger tip
joyous empty jaw
 mangled
blanked out
 hinging
his bones
 clogging
a lark like summons
 a stomp
barefoot trounce
 on musky weeds

rail track slumber
 tar rock pillow
smoldered turn in his coat

bean scum
 face
an engine
a freight whining steel

gold speckled neck
 on the rail
rolling head

—

stark is the wood stove in the dark
its bulbous hull a womb
 of popping embers

simmering corn filling the house
with a nutty perfume

what sounds but guzzle
of a pumped well
the gushing water against the metal

stark is slowness
 scything of grass
chucking grain toward
chickens
 low bark of hounds

gnats backlit by the sun
 their flight pattern
scattered in gold

song of exoskeleton
zoom of the june bug's wings
 lifting itself
from the screen door
and off to the damp night

far away roar of tire
bucking junk in the truck bed

slow sputter and buzz
of a mower echoed in the gully

the radio whispering
a piano that vibrated
 gospel
when it uttered

—
In the mirror I see how your mouth made vowels
when you sang into a mug of lager. Always in the dim
misted window light — a gush in the throat — some memory
under your wrinkled brow.

Not eggs in the grease.

Not flame under skillet, but glowered lips gripping the strike,
minnow-shine in the divots of your forehead — sunup shading
craggy, punched sheetrock — my cheek scraping the balding
linoleum, crumbs of bacon and black pepper under the rust
speckled stove.

Not the stereo humming the trailer tin,
no “poor man’s dollar” hollered to the pounding of biscuit doe
shaking rain down the window, just a wild grimace in the dark.
In the evenings watching your hair bounce
until all I could see
was the dark, and the swallows of flat beer numbed me to sleep.

Looking at our faces I realize this isn’t much, that all I have to offer
is isolation, that deep ringing in the inner ear.

Thinking of those days,

I imagine melting your records in the slow embers of the wood stove fire,
watching them burn to black smoke, but this isn’t about anger.
It’s about our face, my daughter’s too, standing here in the mirror,
chest to chest, me holding her, twitching and stiff as she brails my lips —
the black of her pupil a marble burnished with womb, not yet etched
with dolour — its about your head wrapped in gauze, face stitched
nose to cheekbone, the hum of ventilator filling the room.

Contributors

Yusef Komunyakaa

Yusef Komunyakaa's books of poetry include *Taboo*, *Dien Cai Dau*, *Neon Vernacular*, for which he received the Pulitzer Prize, *Warhorses*, *The Chameleon Couch*, *Testimony*, and most recently *The Emperor of Water Clocks* from FSG. He has been the recipient of numerous awards including the William Faulkner Prize (Universite Rennes, France), the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, the Kingsley Tufts Award for Poetry, the Shelley Memorial Award, and the 2011 Wallace Stevens Award. In addition to poetry, Komunyakaa is the author of several plays, performance literature and libretti, including *The Deacons*, *Saturnalia*, *Weather Wars*, *Wakonda's Dream*, *Testimony*, and *Gilgamesh*. He is a Global Professor and Distinguished Senior Poet at New York University.

Santee Frazier

Santee Frazier is a member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. Frazier earned a BFA from the Institute of American Indian Arts and an MFA from Syracuse University. In 2001 he was awarded the Truman Capote Scholarship from the Institute of American Indian Arts Creative Writing Program and in 2009 the University of Arizona Press published his collection of poems under the title *Dark Thirty* as part of their *Sun Tracks* series. The same year Frazier received the Lannon Residency Fellowship and was also the School for Advanced Research Indigenous writer-in-residence in Santa Fe. Most recently was awarded the 2013 Native Arts and Culture Foundation Literature Fellowship. His writing has appeared in several US and international publications including *American Poet*, *Narrative Magazine*, *Ontario Review*, and *Ploughshares*. His writings examine the intersections between native life and contemporary America with an uncompromising view towards beauty and truth. Frazier is currently a writer and instructor at Syracuse University, in addition to his duties as a faculty mentor in poetry and advisor at the Institute of American Indian Arts.

Jane Springer

Jane Springer is author of two collections of poetry, *Dear Blackbird*, and *Murder Ballad*. Her honors include a Pushcart prize, an NEA fellowship, a MacDowell fellowship, Best American Poetry prize, and a Whiting Writers' Award. She teaches literature and creative writing at Hamilton College in central New York, where she lives with her partner, John Powell, their son, Morrison, and their two dogs, Leisure-Lee and Azy.

Caitlin Vance

Caitlin Vance is a student in the Syracuse University Creative Writing MFA program. Her poems and stories have appeared in *Tin House*, *The Southern Review*, *ZYZZYVA*, *The Literary Review*, *NightBlock*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, and *BOAAT*.

